



consumer news

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE

Office of Consumer Affairs

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Vol. 4, No. 7, July 1, 1974

Microwave oven controversy

Consumers have been asking questions about microwave ovens. Are they safe to use? Is there risk attached to radiation given off by these appliances? Answers come from **Food & Drug Administration (FDA)**, which establishes safety standard for microwave ovens.

Consumers who have microwave ovens should feel safe using them providing they follow manufacturers' directions. FDA says there have been no cases of radiation injury related to microwave ovens when these ovens are used properly. Since it is important to follow directions, FDA has proposed that manufacturers' instructions concerning proper use should be attached directly & permanently to the ovens [see "Microwave ovens" in this issue of CONSUMER REGISTER].

Microwave ovens are electronic devices that heat with a form of radiant energy that cooks foods rapidly. These ovens do give off a measurable amount of radiation—as do other electronic devices (radios & television sets) & many appliances with electric motors (electric shavers, food mixers, vacuum cleaners). But the amount of radiation that may be emitted by microwave ovens is limited by FDA's safety standard for radiation control. (The limit is 5 milliwatts per square centimeter, measured at a distance of 2 inches from the oven door.) FDA's safety standard also requires that a microwave oven must have at least 2 separate safety interlocks to shut off radiation as the oven door is opened.

FDA now tests all microwave ovens before they are put on the market, or approves their safety specifications. All ovens found in stores today carry a certification seal stating that they comply with the Federal radiation control standard. The standard sets more requirements for interlocks of ovens that will be manufactured after Aug. 7.

However, the standard does not cover ovens made before Oct. 6, 1971 (these do not have a certification seal). If you own or use an older oven, follow these special precautions suggested by FDA: (1) switch oven off before opening door; (2) stay at least an arm's length away from front of oven while it is on; (3) have oven tested for radiation emission (call your regional or district FDA office or your appliance dealer to run the test).

For all consumers using any brand of microwave oven—regardless of when it was made—FDA offers these safety tips:

- When you get the oven home, examine it for evidence of shipping damage.
- Follow manufacturer's instruction manual for use & care of oven.
- Clean door, seals & inside of oven with water & mild detergent. Grease around door seal can cause excess radiation emission. Do not clean with scouring pads or other abrasives.
- Never insert objects through door grill or around door seal. Never allow even a paper towel to stick out of door.
- Never tamper with or inactivate oven safety interlocks.
- Never operate an empty oven.
- Have oven checked regularly by a microwave oven technician for wear, damage, tampering & radiation emission.

For more details on microwave ovens & safety, write to FDA, HFI-10, 5600 Fishers Lane, Rockville, MD 20852. Ask for *We Want You to Know about Microwave Ovens & The Microwave Oven Safety Debate*.

(See article about shopping for microwave ovens, back page of this issue.)

Tips on tanning

Don't ruin the good old summertime with a bad old summer sunburn. Here is advice from **Food & Drug Administration (FDA)** on how to enjoy sunning—even while protecting your skin:

- Remember that sun speeds the skin's aging process. Get your suntan slowly & always protect yourself with a chemical product or with hat, shirt & other protective clothing.
- Certain people should take special precautions: older people; people with lighter & thinner skin; people taking certain medications (tranquilizers; estrogens; diuretics; drugs used to treat diabetes). People being treated for any form of cancer should not expose themselves to sun. When in doubt, ask your doctor.
- If you have "average" skin, you can start with 40 minutes on your first day, go to 45 the second day, increase to 50 the third & fourth days. This gradual approach builds protection.
- Use a protective product & reapply it often. Swimming, perspiration, sand & clothing remove lotions, creams & oils. Pay special attention to shoulders, knees, feet, lips & ears. Use zinc oxide ointment or mix calamine lotion with cold cream to protect tender areas by blocking out sun completely. Creams & lotions usually offer more protection than oils. Baby oil only makes you greasy.
- Protective products are divided into sunblocks & suntans. Sunblocks contain more of the ingredient that screens out burning ultraviolet rays; they offer more protection than suntan products. Study advertising claims & label directions to learn what products offer. Those stressing a dark tan usually give less protection; they contain less of the screening ingredient. Products claiming to "tan" you indoors actually stain your skin. Staining gives no protection from the sun.
- You're more likely to burn at certain times & in certain places: between 10 a.m. & 2 p.m.; on sand or water; in an unpolluted area; in hotter climates.
- If you are uncomfortable but not seriously burned, apply wet dressings of gauze dipped in a solution of baking soda & corn starch—1 tablespoon of each to 2 quarts of cool water. In a pinch, use cool milk or water. If you get a bad burn, see a doctor.

What should you look for in a warranty?

How much do appliance warranties tell you? Not as much as they should, according to the Major Appliance Consumer Action Panel (MACAP), which is sponsored by 3 trade associations representing the home appliance & gas appliance industries & retail merchants. After conducting a study last year, MACAP concluded that many appliance warranties could be improved.

MACAP told CONSUMER NEWS that it examined 106 different warranties submitted by major appliance manufacturers, importers & private label manufacturers. These covered a variety of products: freezers, refrigerators, humidifiers, washers, dryers & other gas & electrical products. MACAP rated the warranties according to the 9 criteria listed below; the percentages tell how many manufacturers met each criterion. In general, MACAP recommended that warranties needed more accurate language, clearer instructions on how consumers should file claims & clearer statements of disclaimers & exceptions.

1. Name & address of the warrantor—80%.
2. Product or specific parts covered & what they are covered for—79%.
3. Specific time for which product or parts are covered—95%.
4. Exactly what the warrantor will do & at whose expense in case of a claim—79%.
5. Exactly what the consumer must do & at whose expense in case of a claim—59%.
6. Warranty terms given in language that is clear, concise, simple & avoids legalese—61%.
7. Exceptions & disclaimers presented as prominently as affirmative statements—70%.
8. Warranty terms stated in printing that is clear, well-spaced & easy to read—80%.
9. Headings or titles presented in a manner that is fully descriptive & accurate—68%.

On the basis of the MACAP study & of various consumer organizations' appraisals of warranties, **Office of Consumer Affairs (OCA)** recommends that consumers ask the following questions when analyzing a product warranty & comparing warranties of similar products.

- Are MACAP's nine criteria covered in the warranty?
- Is the service contract (or "maintenance agreement") fairly priced?
- Does the service contract merely offer services already given under the warranty?
- Would you be expected to start paying finance charges immediately on the service contract, even though it might not become effective until a year after you purchase the appliance?

A note about Congress

Legislation to establish a **Consumer Protection Agency (CPA)** is expected to be taken up by the U.S. Senate soon. If enacted, the CPA will be an independent agency speaking for consumers, staffed by specialists including economists & lawyers. The House of Representatives recently passed a bill to establish a CPA by a 293-94 margin.

Warning!

• **ELECTRIC FRY PANS—Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) & National Presto Industries, Inc.** urge consumers owning certain Presto or Sears, Roebuck & Co. electric fry pans manufactured prior to September 1973 to contact Presto or Sears about possible excessive current leakage that could cause electric shock. The possible problem exists only in fry pans that (1) have never been used or (2) have been used for less than 2 hours or (3) have not been used for a prolonged period since their last use. There is no known problem with pans that have been used regularly since the possible problem tends to correct itself with usage. Consumers can identify pans with possible problems by checking serial numbers on bottom of pans. On the Presto pans, the following serial numbers indicate they were made before September 1973: (1) numbers whose last 2 digits are "72" or less or (2) numbers whose last 2 digits are "73" & are lower than "3673." On Sears pans, which were made for Sears by Presto, the models have numbers beginning with "620" & have a month/year date code below the word "series" that reads "0873" (for Aug. 1973) or a code for an earlier date. Consumers owning Presto pans should contact National Presto Industries Inc., Service Dept., P.O. Box 83, Eau Claire, WI 54701; include serial & model numbers of pan. Consumers with Sears pans should contact their local Sears store. Consumers should discontinue use of pans until they have been checked. Where necessary, both Presto & Sears will repair or replace pans without charge.

Fill in & return

Food & Drug Administration (FDA) & Office of Consumer Affairs (OCA) are conducting a project to encourage consumers to comment on proposed regulations by Federal agencies. For 3 months **CONSUMER NEWS** is printing a form in each issue for readers to use to comment on an item mentioned in **CONSUMER REGISTER**. FDA will keep a count on the number of forms returned & send the forms to the appropriate agency. The count will be used to determine whether to provide forms on a regular basis sometime after the project ends in August. Agencies receiving the forms will consider the comments in making decisions about proposed regulations.

Clip this form, fill in blanks, write your comments & mail to **CONSUMER REGISTER**, Office of Consumer Affairs, Washington, DC 20201.

This is my opinion on (title of item in **CONSUMER REGISTER**) _____

by (name of agency) _____,

published in *Federal Register* on (date) _____ on (page) _____

Name _____ Date _____

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Shopping for a microwave oven?

Thinking of buying a microwave oven?

They have advantages: They cook fast (about 5 minutes per pound for a roast) & are especially convenient for thawing or cooking frozen foods. They save energy in cooking some food items. They keep your kitchen cool (microwaves heat the food, not the oven). Clean-ups are easier (cook on disposable paper plates & just wipe the oven with a damp rag & mild detergent).

Microwave ovens have drawbacks, too: They are not all-purpose ovens (you still need a conventional oven for cooking or baking certain things). Many do not brown steaks & chops. They require that you learn new cooking techniques & give special attention to certain foods (frequent turning of bulky items, for instance).

With the help of industry & utility specialists, CONSUMER NEWS has developed the following buying guides for consumers who are shopping for a microwave oven:

- Read various manufacturers' manuals of instructions & recipes. Learn what each model offers, what wiring or special utensils it may require & what timing to expect from it (about 4 minutes for 1 potato, for instance, but about 8 minutes for 2 potatoes).
- Examine various models. Will you want a tabletop (portable) oven or a free-standing range (containing both microwave & conventional ovens)? A portable plugs into any household outlet, but it does need its own 110-120-volt circuit to work efficiently. A full-size range needs a separate 220-volt line.
- Understand what guarantees & warranties each manufacturer offers. [See "What should you look for in a guarantee?," page 2, this issue.]
- Ask about cost of replacing megatron (vacuum tube that generates microwaves) & other parts.
- Ask whether technicians are available to provide servicing. What are rates for servicing?
- Consult your local utility company for guidance on energy saving aspects. Will a microwave oven save energy on all cooking chores, compared with a conventional oven? Would you save more energy with a higher-wattage or a lower-wattage model? What might your average yearly energy savings be with a microwave oven?
- Consider pros & cons of waiting to buy a model with additional safety interlock features. FDA's deadline for these additional features is Aug. 7, but there will be a time lag before these models reach stores.

CONSUMER NEWS is published the 1st & 15th of each month by the Office of Consumer Affairs, Health, Education & Welfare Dept., to report Federal Government programs for consumers. Use of funds for printing this publication approved by the Director of the Office of Management & Budget, June 27, 1973. Authorization to reproduce any or all items is granted. Editorial address is CONSUMER NEWS, Office of Consumer Affairs, Washington, DC 20201 (telephone: 202-245-6877); Ed Riner, Editor; Lee Learner Gray, Managing Editor. Sold by Superintendent of Documents, Government Printing Office, Washington, DC 20402; subscription \$4 a year, payable to "Supt. of Documents." Send address change to Supt. of Documents.

☆ U.S. GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE: 1974-546-258-23
DHEW PUBLICATION NO. (OS) 74-108

DEPARTMENT OF
HEALTH, EDUCATION AND WELFARE
OFFICE OF CONSUMER AFFAIRS
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20201

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Consumer News: July 1

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